

# The powerlessness and the glory in *Iliad* 24

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*Homeric heroes are obsessed with achieving the glory which victory in battle and its celebration in song can bring, but what sort of glory is achieved by the aged Priam, the peaceful Achilles, and the dead Hektor in the battle-free Iliad 24?*

The ending of the *Iliad*, the poem of Ilios, is set in Troy and it celebrates Hektor. Hektor's name holds the same place in the very last line – '(the funeral) of the breaker of horses, Hektor' – as Achilles held in the first – '(the fury) of Peleus' son, Achilles'. It is to Hektor's undying glory that his burial and lamentation conclude the whole poem. And this crowns the aspiration he expressed, when he realized that he was about to die at the hands of Achilles:

*'Still, let me not fall without effort; I shall not go without glory.*

*Let my last blaze be so bright that future stories celebrate this fight.'*

He succeeds in this: the poem grants him his glory every time it is read or heard (or even read about).

## A different kind of glory

In book 22 Hektor's glory (in Greek, *kleos*) comes from facing death with open-eyed courage. But are valour, warcraft, strength, killing, bloody trophies and so forth the only way to win *kleos*? Undying glory is ultimately achieved through the recording of actions and words that are handed down in poetry: it is the epic poetry itself that decides what is immortalized and what not. So inclusion in the poem is the final criterion of whether or not *kleos* has been won. And clearly the *Iliad* – and even more the *Odyssey* – does not narrate and celebrate only the feats of the battlefield. Think of some of those who have their roles made immortal by the poems: Paris, Andromache, Thersites, Nestor, Nausikaa, Polyphemos (the Cyclops), Eumaios (the pig-farmer), Phemios (the bard)... Even Klytaimnestra, in the last book of the *Odyssey*, although hers will not be a pretty story:

*'She shall become a repulsive poetry among future generations,  
and pour ill repute upon all of womankind...'*

The last book of the *Iliad* contains no battle, not even any deeds of macho assertion. So what is glory won for here? And what does Zeus mean when he says to Thetis: 'I have a way of allowing Achilles a new opportunity for fame (*kudos*)'?

Apollo offers a key to these final scenes, I suggest, when he says:

*'Others have been bereaved of even closer loves, a brother or son,  
yet after lament and mourning, they let go, and go on living –  
for the Fates have endowed the human heart to endure.'*

Apollo is arguing that the gods should interfere and steal the body of Hektor away from the vengeful rage of Achilles, who is behaving with a relentlessness that makes him un-human. But Zeus finds a way that allows Achilles more freedom, and thence more 'fame'. Before the poem is over Achilles will come to

recognise that he is human; and he will have given the old king Priam advice which harmonizes with Apollo's account of the human heart:

*'Endure, and don't go on grieving endlessly for your son –*

*dark despair does nothing; fierce sorrow makes no real difference.*

*Never, never will you stand him up again...'*

Achilles comes, then, to recognise for himself the endurance of the human heart.

## The glory of understanding

So what do Priam and Achilles win their *kleos* for in the sequence of scenes between *Iliad* 24 line 120 and line 676, over 550 lines that are spent almost exclusively on them? What do they do and say here that is so special? For a start, they both obey direct advice from the gods, even though it costs them great effort. That is a kind of endurance. Achilles has to give up the body of Hektor with his own hands, even though he feels that this is letting down Patroklos. Priam has to set off from Troy without protection into the dark of the night outside the city walls, contradicting all cautious advice. And then he puts himself at the mercy of the hands of Achilles:

*'I have brought myself to do what no other man on earth has ever done – pressed my lips to the hands of the man who mangled my son.'*

They also both of them have to get the better of their anger and resentment against each other. Achilles has to understand that Priam has, like him, lost the person who was dearest to him in all the world. Priam, in his turn, has to recognise that not even the great Achilles, nor even his father Peleus, enjoy unmixed blessings; that they too, like him, must face the imperfections of human life, and learn to put up with them. No one is exempt from mortality; no one is exempt from bereavement; no one can forbid death to take others, and eventually to take them themselves. No one who is human, that is.

Both of them, in the depth of their grief, have tried to close off their own bodies from essential human activities, the nutrients of living. They have both denied themselves sleep, and they have both refused food. This is a kind of refusal to face the endurance of going on living. It is only after they have come to see the truth that 'the Fates have endowed the human heart to endure', that they turn back to being alive. First Achilles insists that they should eat (599ff.). And then, after they have feasted and drunk wine, Priam urges the necessity of sleep:

*'Please prepare a bed for me, my lord,  
so I may lie down at last, and savour the sweetness of sleep.*

*I have not closed my eyelids since the day my son died at your hands;  
for ever awake I have wept and brooded on my endless anguish.'*

The last picture of them together is that of Achilles showing

Priam to his bed, taking the old man by the wrist so that he should not feel afraid.

This great scene is not there because it is essential to the saga of the Trojan War: it is not. It is there to show Priam and Achilles achieving a different, rare kind of glory, one that does not demand action, but understanding. Regardless of their private midnight meeting, Troy is doomed to go up in flames, now that it has lost its key protector. And Achilles has already made the fatal, irreversible choice to stay at Troy and to die young. He himself told of the prophecy his mother gave him:

*'If I stay here at Troy and join in battle for the city, then my home-coming is cancelled, but I gain indestructible glory.'*

But it turns out that this indestructible glory is not to be won only by fighting, but also by recognising that he is human, and acting upon that awareness. The courage and pity and fellow-feeling shared between Priam and Achilles do nothing to change the course of the war, or to enlighten others on either of the two sides. Neither the Greeks nor the Trojans are even told about what passed in private between the two enemy mourners.

### **Flies on the wall**

So who does witness their private human understanding? Whose benefit is it all for? My answer is 'the flies on the wall' – that is today the audience of the poem. And 'the audience' actually means all its audiences, past, present, and future... including us. We see that even this great old dynast, and even this superhero warrior had to suffer, to grieve, and to move on. Even they were bereaved of their dearest, and could 'never, never stand them up again'. As surely as food and sleep mean nothing to the dead, so surely they had to find the heart to eat and to go to bed and to go on living. We too, in our turn, puny though we may be by comparison, will confront bereavement. Everyone, unless they die young – in which case their parents are likely to face a particularly bitter bereavement – everyone will sooner or later lose loved ones to death. They – we – will have to learn to grieve, and to learn how to live on. They will find that the Fates have endowed them with the heart to endure.

### **Glory in death – lamenting Hektor**

And what, finally, is Hektor celebrated for at his funeral, once his body has been returned to Troy? The whole poem ends with the laments of three women, followed in the last twenty lines by the formalities of the cremation and burial. Andromache laments him first in his role as father, husband, and protector. While alluding to his prowess in war – 'your father was not soft and gentle in the turmoil of battle' – her words evoke above all the family man, as he was seen in the famous scene in book 6. Secondly his mother Hekabe emphasizes how he has been favoured by the gods: they have kept his beloved body fresh and intact, even despite Achilles' maltreatment of it in revenge for Patroklos. She reiterates, though more bitterly, the truth that Achilles himself had insisted on to Priam: 'Yet still he could not make him stand up straight again'.

And, thirdly, Helen, the fabulous Helen. Her lament is almost entirely personal. Hektor, unlike nearly everyone else, was, she says, kind to her:

*'If someone else insulted me ... you would calm them with your words,  
your gentleheartedness and your gentle way with words.  
And that is why I weep for you, and for myself in my isolation:  
you were the only one in the whole wide land of Troy  
who was  
kind and friendly to me – everyone else shivers at the sight of me.'*

Not the commander, not the soldier, nor the public figure, but the man who was gentle and kind. Kind even to the deeply ambivalent Helen, the immigrant woman who, however beautiful, has brought Troy nothing but trouble. Even in its closing moments the *Iliad* springs this thought-provoking surprise. But then the *Iliad* is constantly surprising. That is one important element in why it is still worth reading (and hearing) afresh.

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